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Global health leadership: recall the past to better understand the present

Światowe przywództwo w dziedzinie zdrowia: Pamiętajmy o przeszłości, by lepiej rozumieć teraźniejszość

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic makes us reflect on the lessons learnt from history, which witnessed the loss of lives, opportunities and leadership. The authors attempt to discuss the implications of the past on dealing with the contemporary health crisis. The scale and unpredictability of the coronavirus have shaken our systems and access to them in a significant way. Regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or age, health care leaders at every level of health system including frontline health care professionals such as nurses, physicians and medical rescuers are confronted with the unprecedented situations that require values-driven, ethical approaches. A once-in-a-hundred-years pandemic offers an opportunity for health leaders to reconsider and refresh the values and priorities they espouse, renew a commitment to strive for a more humanized approach to the pandemic, solidarity, equality and democracy and, of course, shared, scientific knowledge. As we learn from history, humanity will celebrate a victory against current and future pandemics.

Key words: pandemic, global health leadership, transformational change, human and humane values

STRESZCZENIE

Pandemia COVID-19 skłania do refleksji nad nauką płynącą z historii. Autorki podejmują próbę omówienia związków przeszłości z radzeniem sobie w obliczu obecnego kryzysu zdrowotnego. Skala oraz nieprzewidywalność koronawirusa w znaczący sposób wstrząsnęły współczesnymi systemami opieki zdrowotnej i dostępem do nich. Bez względu na płeć, rasę, pochodzenie etniczne, religię czy wiek – liderzy służby zdrowia na każdym poziomie systemu opieki zdrowotnej, a także pracownicy pierwszej linii

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kontakty, tacy jak pielęgniarki, lekarze i ratownicy medyczni, stają w obliczu bezprecedensowych sytuacji wymagających etycznego podejścia opartego na wartościach. Tym samym raz na sto lat pandemia stwarza liderom opieki zdrowotnej możliwość ponownego przemyślenia i odświeżenia wartości i priorytetów, jakimi się kierują, odnawiając zobowiązanie do poszukiwań bardziej ludzkiego podejścia do pandemii, solidarności, równości i demokracji oraz – co oczywiste – do dzielenia się wiedzą naukową. Historia pozwala nam wierzyć, że ludzkość będzie świętować zwycięstwo nad obecnymi i przyszłymi pandemiemi.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia, globalne przywództwo w dziedzinie zdrowia, przemiany transformacyjne, wartości ludzkie i humanitarne

Introduction

As we take stock of what we have learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth reminding ourselves of the insights to be gained by reflecting on history. For example, the Plague of Athens, Greece in 430BC (Horgan, 2016) devastated the city and killed up to one-third of the population, including its leader, Pericles. In the fall of 429 BC, Pericles, the mastermind of Athenian glory, succumbed to the Plague. His death was, according to Thucydides, disastrous for Athens, because his strategies were quickly abandoned and without them the golden age was lost.

Objective

History offers far more lessons about leaders' vulnerabilities and arrogance when confronted with a grand challenge such as a pandemic. In confronting COVID-19, could we have failed to see implications of the past?

Main body

In the current crisis, global health leaders have faced unprecedented, multi-faceted complexities stemming from the dynamics of our greatly globalized, connected world. Differences in health systems and cultures, including varying levels of trust in government and science, feelings of solidarity, and values reflected in socioeconomic inequalities and their accompanying health disparities, contributed to a lack of global cohesion and

cooperation. This, of course, was to the world's peril, as COVID-19 recognizes no borders, nor, to some extent, social classes. There is great inequality and injustice in how this crisis is impacting life globally (Horton, 2020, 374). The scale and unpredictability of the coronavirus have shaken our systems and access to them in a significant way (Czabanowska, 2020). Though the pandemic has disproportionately affected those who are poorer, we have all suffered. The pandemic challenges our collective tolerance to adversities, tests the prioritization of human and humane values and the fragile balance between empathy and solidarity, equality, security and democracy.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, social values and civil liberties seemed to have a polysemous place in higher education public health textbooks and in well-crafted reports. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, global health leaders and all the world's citizens were forced to rethink and reflect on what we thought we knew about health, ethics, democratic values and politics. Undoubtedly, the burden on global health leaders' shoulders is heavy, demanding and complex; they are called upon to grasp the full spectrum of the pandemic dynamics and to make tough and urgent decisions that affect almost all facets of living across populations. They find themselves in "four critical situations" which according to the philosopher Roman Ingarden include: "to be responsible", "to accept responsibility", "to be called to responsibility", "to act responsibly" (Czabanowska, 2020). Regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or age, the senior public health workforce is expected to

respond effectively and use leadership skills to influence and guide involved actors such as health, policy, legislative and economic decision makers. The same applies to leaders at every level of health system including front-line health care professionals such as nurses, physicians and medical rescuers who are confronted with the unprecedented situations, the solutions to which are often tested as there is not enough evidence to make informed decisions. Exhausted to maximum, health care professionals lead responsibly with dignity and empathy. We are witnessing a transformational change. This change will require values-driven, ethical, authentic transformational leaders at all levels of the health system who are accountable to contribute essentially in crafting new, concrete policies that could alleviate – even better – to solve the problem.

However, the truth is that global health leadership may be surprisingly fragile; a chain is as strong as its weakest link, and in this global crisis, should one link fail to live up to its responsibility to its citizens, the endeavor collapses. In the context of the current pandemic, every case mattered. Without a consistent, coordinated, collaborative global response and strategy, we met with collective failure.

A once-in-a-hundred-years pandemic offers an opportunity for global health leaders to reconsider and refresh the values and priorities they espouse, renewing a commitment to strive for a more humanized approach. Maybe Einstein's words, "in the middle of every difficulty, lies opportunity" makes sense in this case; to turn the death, pain, and agony of our fellow humans into a sacrifice that global health leaders and collaborating actors will translate into collective awareness of the need for health protection, security, solidarity, equality and democracy and, of course, shared, scientific knowledge. We need to develop a fresh conception of global – local unity supported by the informed individual and collective responsibility to do

the right thing for ourselves and for the other, whomever they may be.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us to actively respect health, life, death, equality, solidarity, and democracy, and to apply these values to our next-door neighbor as well as to foreign people across the globe. We are inter-dependent and vulnerable, living in "post normal times" (Sardar, 2010) where "we live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense" (Donnelly, 2020). Let's learn from the pain which came out of current pandemic and learn from the emerging future.

Conclusions

If we do not illuminate and weaponize the narratives of human grief, then new modes of thought may offer inspiring pictures of what human beings can be at their best. If we can internalize the idea that health, equality, solidarity, and democracy are fundamental values we need to commit to in order to re-build our world, then we may feel optimistic that humanity will celebrate a victory against current and future pandemics and face the future stronger and more human.

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